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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HARARE 000336

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL ZI

SUBJECT: GOZ SETS SIGHTS ON NGOS, CUTS PARLIAMENTARY SUPPORT PROJECT, THREATENS OTHERS

REF: A. REF A: HARARE 205
B. REF B: 2005 HARARE 395

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher W. Dell under Section 1.4 b/d

Summary

11. (SBU) The GOZ has turned its attention to NGOs perceived as unfriendly and to be working with the political opposition and Western governments. The USG-funded State University of New York (SUNY) parliamentary support project became the first victim on April 13 when Clerk of Parliament announced that Parliament's relationship with SUNY was terminated. On April 16, Information Minister Sikhanyiso Ndlovu announced that the GOZ had annulled licenses of NGOs to allow the government to screen out groups with ties to the West. To the best of our knowledge, however, no such step has been taken. No civil society groups have been forced to close. Although we cannot rule out future action, it appears more likely that the government's intention was to intimidate Zimbabwe's civil society.

Successful USG Support to Parliament Terminated

12. (SBU) The Clerk of Parliament, Austin Zvoma, gave the USAID Mission Director on April 13 a letter from the Speaker of Parliament, John Nkomo, terminating Parliament's relationship with SUNY, which had been providing technical support and training to the legislature's committee system since 2000 (ref A). Zvoma, who was visibly distraught, also

gave the Director a letter from him noting the termination (emailed to AF/S). Zvoma said that while he signed his letter it had been in fact drafted by the executive branch.

¶13. (SBU) Both Nkomo's letter and the Clerk's letter noted that the termination stemmed from the GOZ's negative reaction to Washington's release of the Supporting Human Rights and Democracy report earlier in April. Specifically, both letters said Parliament officials had been insulted by claims in the report, especially the claim that the USG had sought to increase the independence of Parliament via its support.

¶14. (SBU) The Ambassador responded in writing to Nkomo's letter and the USAID Director to the Clerk's (emailed to AF/S). Both letters expressed regret at the decision while emphasizing that the SUNY project had been the sole USG program that had been implemented with the GOZ, at the request of the GOZ, and to the benefit of the GOZ. (Note: Since inception, the USG has provided US\$5.8 million to SUNY's parliamentary support project.) The Ambassador also expressed hope that Parliament would continue to exercise independence, despite the loss of SUNY's support.

Civil Society Threatened

¶15. (SBU) Information and Publicity Minister Sikhanyiso Ndlovu on April 16 publicly stated that the GOZ had revoked the licenses of all NGOs in an attempt to ferret out groups "seeking to force regime change." Addressing ruling party supporters in Bulawayo, Ndlovu said that such NGOs were

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working with the MDC under the umbrella of the Save Zimbabwe Campaign to violently overthrow the government. (Note: Suggesting that the Minister was kicking off his parliamentary election campaign, Ndlovu made the address in Mpopoma constituency, which he lost to the MDC in 2000 and again in 2005. End Note.) Speaker of Parliament and ZANU-PF Chairman John Nkomo echoed these statements days later when he said that these NGOs "were creating an un-African culture, (by) giving money to people to remove their leaders."

¶16. (SBU) Despite Ndlovu's and Nkomo's statements, we are not aware of any NGOs losing their licenses or being otherwise forced to close down. In fact, most USG partners in civil society are not registered as NGOs but rather as Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) or &trusts.⁸ They fall under the jurisdiction of the high court or are common law entities and have no licenses to revoke. Most international NGOs operate under bilateral government agreements, the UN/WFP framework, or through Memorandums of Understanding with the GOZ. Moreover, Labor and Social Welfare Minister Nicholas Goche, under whose portfolio NGOs fall, has yet to make a public statement on the issue.

¶17. (SBU) Adding further credence to the impression that Ndlovu's and Nkomo's statements were essentially rhetoric was an aborted meeting at the Ministry of Home Affairs on April 18. Several of Zimbabwe's most prominent human rights groups had been summoned to the meeting, ostensibly to discuss the creation of a GOZ-appointed human rights commission. There was widespread concern that the meeting would in fact be the next step in a government campaign against civil society. In the event, the meeting was cancelled, indicating that its purpose had been as advertised. (N.B. As a sidelight, the Ministry had summoned the human rights groups through UNDP. The groups had no difficulty believing UNDP would be complicit in a government crack down) a sad commentary on the UN body.)

The Specter of a New NGO Bill

¶8. (SBU) The renewed attack on civil society has stoked fears among NGOs that the GOZ might attempt to revive the dormant "NGO Bill", which would have forced all civil society groups to be vetted by a GOZ-appointed board similar to the board that oversees journalists and media outlets. The NGO Bill, which faced near universal criticism, passed Parliament in 2004, but suffered a pocket veto by Mugabe (ref B). Although the bill was never enacted, it has remained a sword of Damocles over the heads of civil society and has led many local NGOs to curtail their activities.

Comment

¶9. (C) The SUNY project has been one of this Mission's most successful initiatives, helping to encourage even ZANU-PF MPs to increasingly criticize executive branch excesses. It is therefore no wonder that the GOZ has turned its sights on SUNY. An ill-informed and pliable Parliament is much more to the regime's liking. That said, we believe it may be that government will have difficulty putting the toothpaste back in the tube. As we have previously reported (ref A), Parliamentarians, especially those on the portfolio

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committees, have discovered a taste for holding Ministers accountable.

¶10. (C) The bigger story would be a concerted government crack down on civil society. We cannot rule this out, particularly given the on-going violent campaign to suppress the MDC and insure a ZANU-PF election victory next year. That said, the goal may very well have been to intimidate civil society rather than risk an international backlash by actually closing these organizations. In our experience, some of these groups may be cowed but the key ones, including ZLHR, CSU, and NCA are very unlikely to back down.
DELL